

Acorn turned on the hose and aimed the nozzle on the red running boards. The flow of the water pushed the fragments of skull and brain matter to the edge of the bridge. The blood frothed and stopped at the more resilient pieces of where Gary Winters's head once used to be whole, requiring Acorn to physically kick the pieces of matter with the toes of his boot.

Smoky watched Acorn shower the deck from atop the anchor's chain link spool. He held a fat cigar in one hand that dirtied the air which usually tasted like honey. Most hated Smoky's cigars, but everyone wondered where he got them. He considered himself an aficionado, and claimed that with each touch down a good cigar is an appropriate souvenir. The cigar smelled like flint and it made Acorn's nose wrinkle. It was from Varadia.

Smoky took out the cigar and pointed to Acorn, "Watch your feet, man."

"Thanks." Acorn picked up his foot. He aimed the hose at the edge of the deck, pushing the pieces of skull and scalp. As it gathered in a pile, Acorn couldn't help but think of the mystery stew that Carris served the other day. He stopped for a bit, rubbing his young face that everyone tells him is handsome but he himself refused to believe it because he hated his crooked smile. "Hey Smoky?"

"Yeah?"

"You ever look at a skull and wonder which parts go to what? Like, that part over there, the pointed one? Bet that's a nose."

"Could be."

"And that furry cubit over there? It looks to be about an inch or two, and I pushed something like that off the ship two minutes ago. Click them together and you got yourself a full eyebrow."

"Okay. Yeah. But where's the eye?"

"I pushed that off first. It creeped me out."

"I never really liked Gary's eyes in the first place."

"I never really liked Gary."

Smoky put the cigar in his mouth and sucked. He watched Acorn for a while and left without saying another word. He had a tendency to do that. Acorn finished his job and wondered how someone of Varadia would react to being hit with Gary's dismembered face and half-eyebrow that fell from the sky. Acorn reasoned that it must be pretty traumatizing. He coiled the hose and went to the nose of the *Interobang*, which was his favorite place. It was also Ash's, and

Acorn disliked when he saw her there. In fact, he disliked most of his family, and was waiting for the day when they decided that they all hate him, too.

There was something about being at the nose of ship that made Acorn happy. He felt like he was in charge of the world, like the *Interobang* was a spear and he was the very tip. It made Acorn feel like he was the tether between whatever land he was visiting and the limitless sky above. That's all the sky really is, in the end. Limitless, infinite, and full of wonder. Acorn knew he can only go up, considering the life he left when he was a ground peddler so many moons ago. He reasoned that when you are stuck on the ground, you'll become attached and eventually find yourself buried beneath it. Of course, that's when trees grow-but fuck acorns.

Underneath the deck and past Smoky who has found himself another place of comfort at the bottom steps, Harmony and Decker walked through marbled halls lined with pictures of important people stitched on rugs by elderly people with nothing to do. Everyone involved was most likely dead or dying.

“So you're telling me that Winter is dead?” Harmony said through gritted teeth.

Decker pushed in his glasses. He needs them desperately because he is almost completely blind. “Yes. Acorn is washing him off now.”

“Like off the deck?”

“Yes.”

“It's going to hit someone below. Who told Acorn to clean it up?”

Decker shrugged. He adjusted his tie. Harmony understands this as a sign of discomfort, “I'm not sure, Madam.”

“Acorn probably took it upon himself.”

“His personality has aligned before in that manner, yes.”

“I should have kicked him off of the ship years ago. Good day, Decker.”

“Good day, Madam.”

Harmony turned the corner and into the grand vestibule of the *Interobang*. It was a vast space with ivory pillars of marble and a central staircase carpeted in some majestic purple velvet. Red banners wrapped around the beams like vines and extended to the netting of the ceiling. The back wall was entirely glass and looked down at the country of Varadia, now a patchwork of

green and brown at such a height. Chandeliers of magnificent crystals found in subterranean trenches and forged in an alchemist's magma hung from the ceiling in golden chains. Due to the grandiose nature of the vestibule, it is the location for the annual New Year's celebration in which the *Interobang* anchors to a mountainside, a trench, or even an unassuming town in some scenarios. The crew gathers for a night beginning in jovial sparks and ending in either nudity or death. Sometimes both.

It always makes Harmony shudder when she walks through the vestibule. She feels that committing to such gatherings with the crew are a blight on her higher status as the ship's Valkyrie. The Maiden of the ship is supposed to be pious and serene, and it makes Harmony's spine contort knowing that two years ago almost everyone had gotten a glimpse of her breasts when Heifi unlatched the slips of her dress in some drunken haze. Harmony still holds disdain for that.

Grey was waiting at the head of the stairs for her. His arms were crossed and he leaned on one of the golden banisters. He smelled like summer grass, which Harmony took as not being able to kick his habit of doing his work in the ship's botanical gardens. Grey was a dirty old man that really liked Harmony's soft skin and golden locks that curled in glorious rings and ended just above her cleavage. She knew this because he told her so. She respected Grey all the same. He was a good book keeper for the ship's taxes and knew exactly the right words to say when the Ironbound called.

"Did Decker send you?" Harmony said.

"Yes, Madam," Grey said in his slow drawl of his Esterian roots, "Head exploded like a grape."

"And who told you this?"

"I saw it myself. That flintlock of his sure packed a wallop."

"He was sick for a while."

Grey shrugged and gestured for Harmony to follow, "Such is the life of a Harbinger."

They walked through the hall and into Grey's office. It was a circular room no bigger than eight feet and had curved book cases filled with tomes of law and arcane knowledge that Grey refuses to talk about. Behind his desk a picture of his dead mother or wife scales the wall. Lady Grey, the crew calls her. She has a gentle gaze and a seafoam green dress. The edges of the picture have begun to frill and now feature ivory tendrils threatening to enclose the picture entirely.

Grey sat in his desk, and rest his hands atop his vested stomach, “As you know, this poses two problems. The first being the obvious one.”

“I haven’t decided the new Harbinger. Winter died maybe an hour ago,” Harmony says, “I’m contemplating on whether I should give the role to someone who is worthy or someone I hate.”

“Give to someone who you think is fit to be one-sixth of a god.”

“Then I’d pick you, Grey. The power is still in the ship, it breathes for someone like yourself.”

“I’m far too old for that, Madam. You have more time than you think but less then you want. The Ironbound probably won’t be calling until the day after tomorrow if a new Harbinger isn’t decided. Now the second issue, and quite possibly the most important one.”

“Our funds.”

Grey smiled. The bristles on his cheeks flexed. “When, not if, the Ironbound discovers that we have not kept our Harbinger safe, they may understandably cut our stipends. The *Interobang* may very well be anchored indefinitely.”

“Do you think they would allow the *Atlas* to have two Harbingers?”

“I’m not saying no.”

“I hate them.”

“As do I. However, I’d rather The Enigma not hate us. If he decides we are not fit enough to protect a Harbinger, then we might as well consider our romantic, swashbuckling lives over.”

Harmony nodded and looked past the book keeper to Lady Grey. She could have sworn that the woman smiled, “Understood. You’ll have your Harbinger by the end of the night.”

Quentin sat with Ash in the dining hall. They were eating a fantastic meal of mashed turnips that were as dry as jerky. It was the fourth time Carris made turnip mash this week and the first time he ran out of butter. At their last touchdown in Varadia, Carris found that turnips are worth a third of what they are in other countries the *Interobang* visited, and stocked up accordingly. He convinced Grey that this was a good investment, but everyone knows turnips are Carris’s favorite food and as the ship’s chef he felt entitled to pick the menu indefinitely.

Quentin washed down the dryness of his mashed turnips with a swallow of L.O.A.A. tea. He watched Ash carefully, making sure she was eating enough to sustain herself and drinking enough to temporarily shield her despair of Winter's death. Ash was not much of a talker, which was convenient because Quentin most definitely was. Unlike Acorn, he was not particularly selective of his friends.

"Carris has outdone himself this time," Quentin said, forking another goop of turnip mash into his mouth.

Ash nodded and took the wine to her lips. They were thin and small, barely hooking over the rim as she drew her head back and let the wine cascade down her throat. She blinked large doe eyes and looked past Quentin's shoulder to some of the crew entering the mess hall.

Quentin turned and saw Heifi, Jocasta, and Witt, Heifi stood in the middle with her arm around Jocasta's waist, and Witt immediately went to the barrels of Varadian wine. They exchanged their distaste with Carris's decision of turnip mash and the bickering ended with Heifi ducking to avoid a thrown chef's knife from within the kitchen floor. They sat down at one of the tables. Quentin returned his attention to Ash.

"No one seems to care about Winters's death," Quentin said, taking a cup to his lips, "It's like no one on this damn ship cares that our friend blew his brains out."

"People cope in different ways, Quentin. Heifi and Witt haven't been on speaking terms since he tried to keep her grounded last time we anchored in Mountenia. Carris is irritable, but not enough to throw a knife at Heifi so soon. He usually lasts about ten more minutes of bickering before he tries to cut someone. If anyone is not affected by Gary's suicide, it is probably Harmony."

"She has other worries, I suppose."

Ash grabbed her plate, finished her wine. "Her qualms will soon be ours. Good night."

"It's six o' clock. Where are you going?"

"Away."

Ash traveled the halls of the ship almost aimlessly. She stopped in the vestibule and looked out the windowed walls as the *Interobang* made its way out to sea. The green squares of Varadia were creeping off into the distance only to be replaced by the frothing seas of the Calisdian Ocean. When Ash was a child her grandfather used to tell her how a nation of sea-people lived in shiny bubbles and ate nothing but shrimp and lobster in this very ocean. When Ash was a teenager she was submerged sixty yards into the Calisdian with two broken ribs and a

collapsing lung, she found nothing but frightening fish and old barnacles. What she did find in some divine light was a guardian angel in the form of a Valkyrie on the ship *Interobang*.

She traveled to the top deck, avoiding the red stains where Gary had blown his brains out. The only one to see Gary's demise was apparently Grey, Acorn, and Smoky, and Smoky is off doing what he liked best in some odd place in the ship and to Ash's irritation Acorn was in her favorite spot at the nose.

Whenever she sees his unkempt brown hair she occasionally remembers how soft it was the only time she ran her hair through it. She remembered how his hair smelled like chestnut and how face felt as smooth as a peach. Ash considered leaving Acorn alone in his solace, giving him the victory in occupying their joint favorite spot. Then she saw the red on his boots, how it was beginning to cake upon his toes like mud. She looked at the coiled hose at the end of the bridge, and noticed that the head was dangling off its hook, reminiscent very much of Acorn's signature of leaving the environment slightly worse than it was originally.

Acorn flinched when Ash stepped next to him. The wooden boards of the *Interobang's* upper deck creaked and croaked at her approach, almost begging her to not start conflict.

"I was here first," Acorn said.

"I'm here now."

"Your breath smells like turnip mash."

"Your breath smells like Smoky on a bad day."

"His cigars suck."

Ash closed her eyes and physically bit her tongue in fear of it loosening. In the darkness she felt the warm sunset wind blow through her limber body, caressing each limb in invisible tendrils of silk. At the nose, she was on top of the world.

"You cleaned him off," Ash opened her eyes.

"Yeah," Acorn was silent for a while and for a second Ash thought that for once Acorn might just be okay with sharing their space. Then he said, "Who is going to be the new Harbinger?"

"Why are you asking me? It's Harmony you should consider."

Acorn looked at Ash with a sideways glance. He ran a hand through his hair and left the deck, going down to wherever Acorn goes. Ash gritted her teeth and stepped to the very tip of the nose. She hooked both thumbs through the loops of her pants and inhaled the sweet tasting air of the fleeting Varadia. She was glad that it tasted like honey instead of turnips, and she was even glad that her ribs were cracking and causing a dull throb in her side. It meant that she was breathing, and she was alive.

They gathered on the top deck at twilight. The sky looked a lovely purple and orange, reflecting onto the ocean below. The *Interobang* was anchored on the Castle of Corals in the center of the Calisdian, a barrier reef grown from a sunken castle of a dead and cruel king before the modern language was invented and Advent First had shifted the land masses of the planet. The wind was headed East towards the continent of Coin, taking the puffy clouds with it in salty bellows across the world.

Morton, Phox, and Acorn were the first to arrive, aside from Grey who had been with her since the beginning, and Ash, who apparently was already here. They were followed soon up the stairs by Smoky and Jocasta. Harmony stood on top the steel spool linking the anchor to the *Interobang*. Whenever a meeting was gathered and the weather was nice enough, the spool acted like a stage for the important or the fool. Also because the one-sixth lifeforce of a God might be too much to contain in the central vestibule.

The Valkyrie stood in uniform for the ceremony. Her golden locks fell down her open back like a golden waterfall. Her metal breastplate reflected the faces of the gathering crew. In one hand was the halberd Dragoon, and in the other a scarlet ether circulated around her arm, cloaking it in a contained red mist that occasionally stretched out a fluid tendril and reached for nothing. As Heifi walked on deck, Harmony thought of making her the Harbinger. She would not understand the power and either pull a Gary Winter or contribute to Advent Seven. Then the Ironbound will be back to the start except this time Grey will probably be dead or dying and Harmony would be damned if that salty old book keeper was not around to provide her confidence.

The crowd shuffled and stirred in anticipation. It was clear to her which have been through this before, when Gary was chosen. Heifi, Grey, and Smoky did not flinch at the miasma's lashing, and Ash was more concerned with looking at the floor, wondering where exactly Gary Winter's head once was. Acorn could tell her, but Acorn would not and Ash sure as hell would not ask.

"Where is everyone?" Harmony addressed the crew.

“I was rounding them up,” Decker’s squeaky voice sounded from the stairs leading to the upper deck. Phox snickered. Decker’s voice was simultaneously irritable and amusing depending on the day but at least everyone else could keep their opinions quiet. Decker was followed by Quentin, Carris, Zoe, Booth, and Witt. Dizzy followed by himself, having just shut off the engines.

Now the crew was here and accounted for. Harmony slammed the butt of Dragoon on the spool, sending out a shockwave of metallic echoes. The scarlet miasma encapsulated her arm and looked like a thin veil of aerated blood. The warm winds underneath the twilight sky pushed forth a wave of air, rocking the anchored ship as it hung aloof above the Calisdia.

Harmony said, “As we know, Gary Winters has died today by method of self-execution a mere six hours ago. Also directly where you stand. More importantly, this poses another matter. Winter was the ship’s Harbinger, a fraction of Eve. Now, the energy runs free if not for my containment.”

Harmony analyzed the crew. She wanted to see which crew members feared Eve the most and perhaps most intently who feared Eve the least. Heifi and Smoky were not friends and were probably never going to be-but they had one thing in common; a sensation of hedonism and indulgence that could very well lead to a magnetism for power. Eve would take over their bodies from the inside out. On the other hand, Morton, Quentin, and Zoe shivered at the sight of Eve twirling around Harmony’s arm, and Eve would make them kill themselves just as the force had done to poor Gary.

Harmony continued, “As you all know, it is important for the Harbinger to be contained and kept safe. The Ironbound fleet is important. We are not just nomads as some call us or air pirates as most call us; we are keepers and protectors of a powerful force beyond our comprehension. What I have in my hand is Eve’s Wrath, the most destructive and unpredictable of Her six faces.”

Acorn blinked and Harmony noticed that he was looking above her and into the sky. Ash kept her eyes to the floorboards. *Yes*, Harmony decided, *it is them*. But whom? Which of the two would be a better fit?

“I volunteer!” Witt said, raising his hand. Booth’s eyes went wide and Carris cursed under his breath.

Smoky fished a cigar from his pocket and everyone became suddenly very vocal about how much everyone did not want him to smoke it. Above the commotion, Smoky took a lighter out and placed the cylinder in between the hole in his beard, saying with a muffle, “Me too.”

Harmony stepped off the spool and used Dragoon as a walking stick; Eve's Wrath was beginning to siphon her own energy now. Both she and Eve need to find a new host, and soon. Valkyries are meant to protect the Harbinger, not become it.

"I have decided," she said, "Acorn, Ash, come."

Both ventured without hesitation. They gave each other sideways glances and Acorn mumbled under his breath. Heifi scoffed as Ash crossed her and Morton's teeth chattering was almost loud enough to rock the ship. Harmony put out her hand, palm up. The red miasma was beginning to feel a lot like fire.

"You two are the most adaptable to this force. I can sense it. However, I am torn. I cannot make this decision wisely. You may both reject this role if you feel threatened. If one of you does, then the power will go to another. Regardless, one of you will be the Harbinger tonight. Eve has spoken."

Acorn looked at Ash and Ash looked at Acorn. There was a silence and the only sounds were that of the waves moving slowly underneath, a couple gulls in the distance, and the puffing of Smoky's cigar. Eventually, Ash said, "I'll do it. I accept. I can handle the duty."

Harmony almost sighed. The miasma had grown strong and she could feel her body beginning to ache throughout. If she had not worn her gauntlets everyone would have seen her fingertips white from clenching Dragoon. She kept her composure and said, "You are honorable, Ash. Put out-"

"Me too," Acorn said. Harmony had forgotten he was there, and it seemed that everyone else did, too.

Ash did not face Acorn when she said, "You're just saying that."

"I can handle it. I don't want to clean up your head of this deck. Blood is hard to get off boots."

Harmony gritted her teeth. Her heart was beginning to beat fast, almost like it was going to burst right out from her reflective breastplate, "Then it is up to Eve. Or what fraction of Her is here. Both of you, place your hands on top of mine."

And they did so, with Ash and Acorn equidistant from Harmony's flaming red palm. There was a small rumble and then a crack of thunder in the distance, even though the weather was as far from an electric sky as it could be. The *Interobang* began to rock and air became so cold it was hot or so heated that it took one's body heat with it. The sky grew into a dark red, a canvas of swirling clouds. Harmony gritted her teeth and dug the butt of Dragoon into the

boards. Ash and Acorn temporarily became a mist of scarlet, a humanoid model of blood. The drums of thunder trekked closer and the waves of the calm Calisdia Ocean jettisoned upwards in hydraulic spears, the peaks cresting in a frothy white. The salty air soon smelled like burning hair.

Harmony closed her hand and yelled above the uproar, “May Eve’s Wrath provide you direction and honor!”

A pulse of red electricity erupted from Harmony’s palm, pushing her, Acorn, and Ash backwards and onto the deck. The sky reverted back to its clear state, the oceans took to napping. It was as if Eve had not been there at all. The crew gathered around them, a collection separated into three groups to assist each fallen member separately.

The burning sensation in her body had ceded, and Harmony lay on her back with the wind knocked out of her. A cold sweat layered her forehead. Decker and Grey stood above her, linking their arms under hers and bringing her to her feet. Harmony reached for Dragoon. She leaned on it for support.

“Madam,” Decker adjusted his tie, “we have a problem.”

“I just completed a transferring of one-sixth of a God. I cannot imagine any problems of yours that might compare.”

Grey said, “Well, that one-sixth is now one-half.”

Harmony rubbed her eyes, “I’m not good at math, Grey. That’s why we have you.”

It was Ash that she saw first. Her crowd of assistance consisting of Heifi, Quentin, and Booth parted. She stood on her feet, scarlet volts of electricity circulating around her for a brief moment before disappearing. Her left eye was a deep red. Ash blinked and watched Acorn rise with the help of Smoky. Morton had gone to help but refrained out of very obvious fear to approach. Acorn brushed dirt off his shoulder and it was clear that his right eye was scarlet, just like Ash’s left. They were a matched set.

“Eve’s Wrath chose both of you?” Harmony said, even though she already knew the answer.

“I can feel Her in both of us,” Ash said, “we are both her vessels.”

Acorn took in a breath and closed his eyes. His feet left the ground and he had begun to float, his arms outspread. Harmony said, “This has never happened before, not in any of the Harbingers.”

“What does it mean?” Ash asked.

Morton stepped forward and held his thick arms. His broad double chin jiggled in nervousness, “Does this mean...Advent Seven?”

Harmony’s strength was regaining. “I do not know, but I will find out,” she turned to Dizzy, who was the *Interobang*’s captain and pilot, “We must leave. Set a course for Elysium. We must obtain the counsel of my sisters.”

“What of the Ironbound?” Grey asked, “They must know that we host two Harbingers now. Remember, we are not the size of the *Atlas*.”

“I hate them,” Carris said, and spit.

Ash looked at her hands. Miniature pulses radiated around them. “We are not two,” she said, “We are one in two bodies.”

Acorn’s feet touched the deck with a sudden thump. The expression on his face was apathy but anyone who knew Acorn knew that was the mask he put on when he did not want to show any surprise. Everyone had seemed to forget he was floating.

“I am my own person,” he said, “the only thing we share is Eve’s Wrath.”

Harmony pivoted and started for the stairs leading to underneath the deck, “Leave the Ironbound out of this until we reach Elysium. Until then, I must meditate.”

She disappeared and soon after most of the crew followed suit. As the anchor unlatched and began to coil mechanically into its spool, Smoky and Phox walked to the edge of the ship, gaining one last glimpse of Varadia in the far distance.

“Look,” Phox said, pointing down. Her red hair swayed in the wind.

“What?” Smoky pulled the cigar out of his mouth and tossed it off the ship. He watched it fall, “Oh.”

“All the fish are dead. Thousands of them.”

“Someone tell Carris. We’ll eat like kings for months.”

“I wouldn’t eat anything that was fried with that sort of power. What exactly are we dealing with?”

“Two Harbingers and not one, Phox.”

“No, one Harbinger and two people.”

Smoky grunted and rubbed his beard. They stared at the ocean for a while. The Calisdian had turned into a nautical graveyard, thousands upon thousands of lax and horizontal fish on the surface of the calm waves, moving absently and lifeless in the current. Scales of silver and gold and blue twisted and turned, a multitude of eyes unblinking and relentless. For whatever reason it reminded Smoky a bit of that look Winter had before he pulled the trigger.